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ABSTRACT

The career academy is a high school model that integrates school-to-work elements in a personalized learning environment. Academies have these three essential features: a school within a school; partnerships with employers; and integrated academic and occupational curriculum centered on a career theme, occupation, or industry. J. Kemple (1997) looked at the effectiveness of the learning community and found that: academies increased support of students from teachers and peers; personal support enhanced student motivation and increased connections between school-based learning and longer-term education and career interests; and most academy students were highly engaged in school. Common elements of the effectiveness of employer partnerships are multiple employers who play multiple roles; coordinators who serve as employer liaisons and facilitators; career awareness activities; and work-based learning. Successful career academies do the following: (1) vary in order to adapt to local needs and circumstances; (2) attract large numbers of diverse applicants, both at risk and not; (3) successfully keep students in school; and (4) improve the chances of graduating. Conclusions and policy implications include: academy teachers are satisfied with the quality of their worklife; academies that have a cohesive culture are most effective; academies should not be expected to solve all the problems of high schools; and to have a real and long-lasting impact on all students, high schools must become dramatically different. (YLB)

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IN Brief
Fast Facts for Policy and Practice
2000 no. 1
National Dissemination Center for Career & Technical Education

by Sandra Kerka

Career Academies

The Career Academy is a high school model that integrates school-to-work elements in a personalized learning environment. Academies were originally designed as a lifeline for students at risk of dropping out. Today, the more than 1,500 career academies in the United States serve a broad cross-section of students preparing for college and work (Kemple and Snipes 2000). What are career academies? Are they effective? What are the best ways to implement the concept?

Key Components

Academies have three essential features:

1. A school within a school–a cluster of students who typically stay with the same group of teachers for 2-4 years, forming a close-knit learning community that gives students personal support.
2. Partnerships with employers who sponsor career awareness and work-based learning opportunities and provide resources and financial support.
3. Integrated academic and occupational curriculum centered on a career theme, occupation, or industry to provide focused, situated learning.

These elements are intended to result in better engagement and academic performance, students' personal and academic development, preparation for college and work, postsecondary attainment, and successful employment.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Research and anecdotal evidence shows a number of positive outcomes in terms of attendance, grades, credits earned, and graduation rates. However, concerns about research methods and questions about the findings have been raised (Kemple and Snipes 2000; Stern, Raby, and Dayton 1992). Responding to these concerns, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) began a longitudinal study in 1993 that used a random assignment design to evaluate nine academies. This study compares students who applied for and were selected by lottery to enroll in a career academy and students who applied but were not selected (Kemple and Snipes 2000). Like many academies, these sites had more applicants than spaces, and students not selected had the same range of strengths and weaknesses as those admitted. Each report on this study focuses on a particular academy feature.

Kemple (1997) looked at *the effectiveness of the learning community* and found that, for students–

- Academies increased support from teachers and peers; students felt teachers had high expectations and peers were interested in school and cooperated in learning.
- Personal support enhanced motivation and increased the connections between school-based learning and longer-term education and career interests.
- Most academy students were highly engaged in school, although not more so than nonacademy students. However, other studies suggest that, for students who feel alienated from or uninterested in school, the impact of a caring learning community on their reengagement is crucial (Cannon and Reed 1999; LaPoint et al. 1996).

Academy learning communities also benefit teachers (Kemple 1997), who have opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and influence decision making, opportunities to develop professionally and provide personalized attention to their students, and higher job satisfaction.

Common elements of *the effectiveness of employer partnerships* are as follows (Kemple, Poglinco, and Snipes 1999):

- Multiple employers who play multiple roles–providing employee time, financial support, equipment, occupational information, internships, student financial aid
- Coordinators who serve as employer liaisons and facilitate career awareness and work-based learning activities
- Career awareness activities, including field trips, job shadowing, mentoring, exploration of the world of work
- Work-based learning

Results of employer partnership activities show that (1) academy 12th graders had equal or higher engagement in career awareness and work-based learning than students in other school-to-work programs; (2) their participation was more frequent and intensive compared to that of nonacademy students; and (3) academies with highly structured partnerships and support for nonteaching employer coordinators had higher participation. Clear differences among academy sites highlight the importance of the following strategies for effective career academies:

- Highly structured partnership management structures with formal agreements and advisory boards
- Coordinators who are full time and do not have teaching responsibilities
- Supports for work-based learning, including orientation for students and employers, employability skills training, and ongoing monitoring of student work experience

The most recent MDRC report (Kemple and Snipes 2000) addresses the *impact of the integrated academy curriculum on engagement and performance*. Academies affected outcomes for students who were likely to drop out much more than for other students. Accounting for such subgroup variables as attendance prior to random assignment, credits earned in ninth grade, grade point average before academy assignment, overage for grade, school mobility, and sibling dropout, subgroup outcomes were different:

- Among students at high risk of school failure, academies significantly cut dropout rates and increased attendance, credits earned, and postsecondary preparation.
- Among the low-risk subgroup, they increased the likelihood of on-time graduation and career-related and vocational course taking, but did not reduce completion of the basic academic core.

- Overall, the medium risk subgroup (50% of sample) showed little or no change in outcomes, but results differ dramatically across sites.
- When results are averaged across the full sample, it appears academy improvements in engagement and performance were only modest, so it is important to examine disaggregated results in order to identify subgroups for whom the academy is most effective.
- Academies did not improve reading and math standardized test scores, but Kemple and Snipes question how well *these tests adequately capture learning from academy model*. For example, nonacademy teachers might teach to the test more than academy teachers, who focus on cross-discipline integration and school-based and work-based learning.

Do academies influence postsecondary success? Many academy students are less well prepared at the beginning of high school and thus not considered likely to go to college. Maxwell and Rubin (1997) found that career academies raise high school achievement, decrease the need for English remediation in college, and increase the probability of college graduation for these students.

Conclusions

- **Sustaining the three key components that distinguish career academies is vital.** This requires effort and commitment from teachers, administrators, employers, and students.
- **Successful career academies vary in order to adapt to local needs and circumstances.** Local variations include numbers of teachers/students, number and content of courses, teacher collaboration, teachers' nonacademy responsibilities, lead teacher responsibilities, degree of integration, and the role and scope of employer involvement.
- **Academies attract large numbers of diverse applicants, both at risk and not,** although the differing outcomes for subgroups suggest they are more cost effective for particular populations (Maxwell and Rubin 1997).
- **Academies successfully keep students in school.** Enrollment is voluntary, and student choice may be influenced by peers, teachers, and families. Students often transfer out of academies for reasons other than failure (Kemple and Rock 1996).
- **Academies improve the chances of graduating** by improving attendance and credit accumulation.
- **Academy teachers are satisfied with the quality of their worklife.** Although they are similar to other high school teachers in background and work experience, their perception of the work environment is shaped by the distinctive conditions of the academy.
- **Academies that have a cohesive culture are most effective.** There are distinct differences between those with a "high contrast" to conventional high school (tighter school-within-school structure, core group of 4-5 academy-only teachers, very few nonacademy students in academy courses, distinct area of the building) and "low-contrast" academies that were more loosely structured.

Policy and Practice Implications

- **Academies should not be expected to solve all the problems of high schools.** They have proven to be an effective means of enhancing the engagement in learning and chances of graduation for students at high risk of dropping out.
- Academies demonstrate a well-defined approach to creating **a more supportive high school environment and increased exposure to career-related learning.**
- **Academies should serve a heterogeneous population.** Even though high-risk students seem to benefit the most, the effects may be partly derived from a mix of these students with those who are already highly engaged.
- **The support of the learning community is necessary for retention and engagement but may not be sufficient to improve academic achievement,** *as measured by standardized tests* (alternative assessments may be more appropriate).
- **Key factors affecting academy implementation include** resources, teacher planning time, administrative leadership, school and district support, employer liaison, varied employer contributions, and a mission linking local needs with program design (Kemple and Rock 1996).
- The career academy model demonstrates that doing things slightly differently is not enough when it comes to educational reform. **To have a real, long-lasting impact on all students, high schools must become dramatically different** (Winger and Barber 1997).

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